

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AS A METHODOLOGY FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

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With the advent of Women's Studies as a field of study much debate has occurred about its particular methodology. On the one hand, one is faced with the whole tradition of university teaching which divides fields of study into disciplines. Each one of these disciplines usually has several differing methodologies, and at the same time the set of methodologies of one discipline is able to be distinguished from those of another discipline.¹ For the most part these traditional methodologies and disciplines have been highly successful, and we do have as the fruit of several centuries of investigation vast amounts of information and knowledge. It is from this perspective that within universities one usually finds teachers and administrations attempting to place Women's Studies within already existing disciplines.

On the other hand, a close examination of Women's Studies courses over the past five years indicates that very few fall easily into these classification. Sometimes a disillusionment is expressed in the extreme by the claim that the traditional disciplines are male and that it is contradictory to use them to study women. Less adamantly one finds interdisciplinary courses on women which cross several disciplines. Here methodologies from more than one discipline are used. In addition, team teaching by people from different traditional disciplines is encountered.²

The difficulty has been that these two opposing views about Women's Studies (viz. that it either fall completely within university structures or that it fall completely without university structures)

are both detrimental to Women's Studies Programs and to the life of the university. The Women's Studies courses which have sprung up outside of the university in free schools and in women's centers have died as fast as they were born.³ It is important to find some way to integrate the needs of the field of Women's Studies into university tradition without losing its vitality and uniqueness as a field of study.

It is my belief that the best structure for a Women's Studies program involves interdisciplinary work at the introductory and at the advanced level with intermediate study in a single discipline. In this way the student can become familiar both with the wide range of material and methodologies available for study in this area and at the same time she can become proficient in a single methodology which will allow her to generate new research in already existing fields.⁴ This result can not be achieved by following a traditional disciplinary program. Similarly it can not be achieved by taking only interdisciplinary courses. It is necessary to combine both. Since this paper is being addressed to women who are presently in the university structure I will confine myself to supporting the first part of my claim: that some interdisciplinary courses are necessary. In particular I will demonstrate the way in which a methodology developed with the cooperation of Greta Nemiroff through team teaching an introductory course at Sir George Williams University for five years successfully indicates a field of Women's Studies in a way that no single method of an existing discipline is able to do.

At this point I would like to turn your attention to the title of this essay in order to delineate more carefully the three subjects mentioned in it: Women's Studies, methodology, and conceptual history. By 'Women's Studies' I understand a field of study which critically examines areas of thought that directly concern what it is to be a woman. This demands two different but related orientations. The first orientation is historical and includes all those facts about women which have been neglected within traditional university study. It calls for research, reclassifying existing information, discovering unclassified material, and critically analyzing historical information.⁵ The second orientation is directed towards contemporary research. It calls for careful study of changing sexual roles and identities, of needs of education, of political alternatives, etc. It is not surprising that the second area of study is as concerned with the identity of men as of women, and in our own program courses in the psychology and sociology departments reflect this by titles such as 'The Sociology of Sex-Roles', and 'Sexual Differentiation'; whereas in the first area the orientation is more clearly directed towards women's neglected history by titles such as 'Women in Religion', 'Women in History', 'Women and the Law', and 'The Nature of Woman'. There is, then, a field which could be called 'Women's Studies' that involves studies both in historical and contemporary areas, that is both interdisciplinary and disciplinary, that calls for critical analysis of knowledge already gathered within universities

and outside as well as generating new research.

The second part of the title is the phrase 'as a methodology'. It is important to note the qualifier 'a'. There are probably many different effective methodologies which can be used at an introductory interdisciplinary level. The one which I will explicate is only one which I have found to be effective.⁶ By 'methodology' I mean an approach which allows one to integrate a great deal of material from a single perspective. In an interdisciplinary course it is crucial to have a single thread which synthesizes the diverse material. The subject 'woman' is not enough.

Integration is further complicated when the course is team taught. Both teachers should agree in principle to the orientation of the course, both should attend all classes, and each should constantly revise her own material so that a synthesis can occur. More direction is needed at the introductory level than at the advanced, but without this the student becomes very confused. An example of how many introductory courses in Women's Studies fail is found in the case where the teacher acts primarily as a moderator depending primarily on outside speakers for the substance of her course. No integration occurs and the student leaves feeling frustrated by the wide diversity of information she has received. A methodology should be clear from the outset in the mind or minds of those teaching the course. Outside speakers and films may be used, but sparingly and only at carefully selected points in the course.

The particular Methodology which we have used provides one

thread for integration and enables us to achieve certain general pre-conceived goals. These goals are: 1) to teach students to read carefully different kinds of material from several disciplines using a conceptual focus, 2) to integrate historical and contemporary material by the same concept, 3) to relate this material to the student's own life situation by recognizing how concepts affect identity, and 4) to stimulate interest in changing society by generating further research and by effecting the student's environment personally and politically.

The final part of the title to be considered is 'conceptual history'. This is the particular methodology which we have found effective in achieving these goals on an introductory and interdisciplinary level in Women's Studies. The closest example of this methodology is found in the intellectual orientation called 'study in the history of ideas'. Some philosophers such as Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger have used it. Lovejoy employed it in The Great Chain of Being. Jung and Marx also used it to some extent. Simone de Beauvoir also used it in specific relation to the notions of transcendence and imminence as they applied to male and female identity in The Second Sex. Betty Friedan used it in her struggle to understand the roots of the alienation of the contemporary woman in The Feminine Mystique and Anais Nin used it in approaching an explication of femininity in her Journals. The premise which all these thinkers share is that the present and future grow out of the past. What it is to be a woman and what it will be to be a woman is dynamically related to what it

was to be a woman.

Of course, the interesting question is: how does this dynamic relation work? How free are we to change? There are two radically opposing historical answers to this question. The first is the essentialist position developed from Plato and Aristotle which claims that natures are eternal and unchanging; and the second is the existentialist position developed from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche which claims that people can become what they choose to become. The truth appears to fall somewhere in the center of these two extremes. Namely, we are conditioned to a great extent by our past, but we are also able in this context to form to a certain extent our own identity. While the problems related to the struggle for identity are posed by philosophers, in order to arrive at an informed position it is important to examine the evidence provided for us by other disciplines as well: Biology, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Literature, and Art History, to name a few. The knowledge and impetus necessary for this process of self-creation is aided by the use of conceptual history as a methodology in Women's Studies.

Specifically, the concepts which we examine in our introductory course are the following: Woman as Evil Temptress, Woman as Virgin Goddess, and efforts to reconcile these polarities in the courtly love tradition and later marriage conventions; Woman as Earth Mother, Woman as Passive Object. We then examine focal issues in woman's development: female sexuality and how it has been defined, the education of women, and women as political activists.

Each examination takes approximately four weeks. The different concepts are separated for purposes of analysis, but it is stressed that they interact and relate dynamically throughout history. It is further noted that there are two periods of history which must be studied. The first is the recent history of each student, the period from birth to the present; and the second is the inherited history, the period which includes all those concepts, archetypes, myths, and events in the past which influence the identity of women in the present.

Finally, it should be mentioned before we look at one particular historical concept in detail that a few weeks are dedicated at the beginning of the course to the general study of archetypes or concepts. Plato, Jung, and de Beauvoir are used as basic sources, and the whole question of the relation between the past and the present is opened up. Plato's view of the eternal nature of forms is compared with Jung's view of the inherited archetypes of the unconscious and with de Beauvoir's view of myth as the creation of humanity. In this way a context is set for the use of conceptual history as a methodology without making any specific claims as to the ontological status of the concepts. It is left up to the student to come to some conclusion about this. In order to bring this methodology to life I will now turn to one specific concept and describe our general lines of study.

In approaching the concept of Woman as Earth Mother it is helpful to distinguish two aspects of the concept: the first is the

symbolic force of the concept itself when found in myths, religions, and in language, literature, and art forms; the second is the economic and political dimension of the concept as tied up with matriarchy and patriarchy. These two dimensions are intricately connected throughout history, but pedagogically it is helpful to separate them temporarily.

The earliest roots of our western spirit are recorded in myths and works of art. A careful examination of these remnants reveal a continual identification of woman with the earth. This identification works in two directions. The earth is described as being like a mother, and mothers are seen as being like the earth. The qualities which they both share are derived from their basic functions of giving birth and nourishing life. The woman and the earth carry the seed, provide the elements necessary for the maturation of the embryo, give forth the fruit of this effort at the right time, and continue to repeat this function until sterility or fallowness set in. The poetic force of the waters of birth, or the vitality of blood, of the richness of milk, and the mystery of the womb pervade early art. Two works in particular are helpful to indicate this positive mythology to the student: The Great Mother by Erick Neumann and The White Goddess by Robert Graves. While there is much to criticize in these books from a feminist perspective, it is important to stress the richness that the Earth Mother concept had, the power of the fertility image, the mystery of the connection of women's cycles of

menstruation with lunar cycles, and the profound love and fear that all people had for the mother.⁷

After this is understood then it is possible to turn to Greek philosophy and examine the change which occurs in the Earth Mother concept when religion, art, and mythology is superceded by philosophical reasoning. Plato forms a link here in that he employs both discursive and poetic thinking in his dialogues.⁸ The crucial point is that the life of the mother concept gets lost when it is transformed into an identification with matter. In Greek philosophy all life comes from the form which becomes identified with the male. Matter, after Aristotle, is totally passive. Because conception was understood at this time as involving the mother purely as the empty vessel waiting for the active seed of the father, Aristotle ended by defining femaleness as being that which provides the matter for life.⁹ He drew the consequences of this biological hypothesis by stating that even in ethics and politics women were impotent males.

Although the philosophical concepts of form and matter are complex, it is my belief that any attempt to understand the evolution of the Earth Mother concept demands a rudimentary grasp of the polarity between form and matter. The dialogues of Plato which are most helpful in this are the Symposium, Republic, and the myths of creation in the Timaeus and Phaedrus. For Aristotle the task is more difficult as references are scattered throughout his works. A bibliography is included at the end of the paper and may be of some use.

The change of the mother from an active symbol of fertility to a passive concept of matter becomes even more inherent in our culture with the change in language from Greek to Latin. Here one finds an incorporation of Jewish and Christian mythical ideology with Greek philosophical concepts. Latin and subsequently several western languages reflect this orientation. If there is time I suggest doing an analysis of the language(s) of the students in the course to show how the masculine and feminine elements work. In French the most obvious example is la terre and la lune vs. le soleil. In English the sex is often hidden, but the force is still there. For example one hears, 'The boat...she floats beautifully', and so on.

In connection with language, it is interesting to develop from an example of the sex-typing of words into the examination of sexual symbolism in the content of dreams and also in artistic works which so often have their root in the unconscious. Cognisant of Jung's discussion of symbolism, we approach Freud's methods of dream interpretation both critically and in order to derive our own methodology from them. Then we discuss poetry dealing with these archetypes: nursery rhymes, folk poetry, as well as more sophisticated works by writers as diverse as Spenser, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Sylvia Plath. In analyzing the concept of the Earth Mother, it is possible to move from fairly primitive renderings of her into more highly conventionalized versions through sources as diverse as Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management, Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People, women's magazines, and of course stories revolving around the role of the mother. (Chekov's The Darling,

Mansfield's Bliss, Oates' Accomplished Desires , as well as those two masterful works on that familiar figure of the super-annuated Earth Mother, Porter's The Old Order and Olsen's Tell Me a Riddle.) We have found it beneficial to choose short works which by the use of symbolism and their implicit artistry embody those concepts we are analysing. The important point, however, for conceptual history as a methodology is that the student be stimulated to view history as creative and active in relation to her own identity.¹⁰

After completion of the symbolic aspect of the Earth Mother concept we can then turn to the political ramifications of the same concept. This takes the form of an introduction to the controversy surrounding the question of matriarchy vs. patriarchy. Whereas previously the relationship most stressed in this study has been the mother-child relationship now we turn to the mother-father relationship. How did the family evolve? What were the power structures of the family and its immediate society? What sort of prestige did the mother have?

Because the course is introductory the student is introduced to these questions and to the problems involved in discovering their own history without being given definite answers. It is hoped that if a deep interest is stirred in the subject that the student will then take a course in anthropology or some other more specific discipline. For our purposes, however, the most effective text to use has been Engles' On the Origin of the Family Here Bachofen's thesis that an original matriarchy overthrown by patriarchy with the advent of private property is introduced. In contrast to this theory one can read the sections of de Beauvoir's The Second Sex

where the conclusions of Levi Strauss are recorded. These findings indicate that matriarchy as such never existed even though matriliney occurred. In addition, there are also many recent attempts of women to uncover the roots of matriarchy which can be used. In spite of the controversy surrounding matriarchal societies, the fact remains that since written history patriarchy has been the prevailing structure of western society. An effective project here is to ask the student to uncover and chart a patriarchal structure in some institution or group familiar to her, eg. her bank, hospital, office, store, children's school, etc. The course can then focus on the effects of the fact of patriarchy on the identity of women. Similarly, the link between the symbolic aspect of the concept and the political can be made. Just as woman is the property of man and exists in and through him, so the moon which is usually seen as feminine reflects the light of the sun.

Further, one can integrate the Earth Mother concept with those concepts already studied in the course. In particular, in our course the concept of woman as evil temptress and its particular manifestation in Eve as well as the concept of woman as Virgin Goddess and its manifestation in Mary demonstrate the aspect of motherhood both in its symbolic and political sense. Eve was the physical mother of the human race, just as Mary, as the second Eve, became the spiritual mother of the world. In addition Eve's subordination to Adam as punishment for her desire to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil mark a clear indication of the religious dynamic of patriarchy. With Mary the prime political structure is the God-soul relationship recorded in her response to the angel Gabriel:

'Let it be done unto me according to your word'. Unfortunately, this has been translated frequently into male-female relationships of patriarchal dimension.

The dual aspect of Mary's motherhood is extremely complex and rich. She is seen as the mother of the world, giving birth to the mystical body of Christ in pain and grief. She is worshipped as the mother of the new earth, the new Jerusalem. At the same time the concept of her motherhood involves a submission which sometimes borders on complete passivity when applied to catholic women.¹⁰ In any event, patriarchy has had a close relation to our western religious roots for centuries although I would not go so far as to say that it is identical with these roots. In studying any concept it is necessary to see its positive dimensions as well as the negative. In connection with this it is helpful to study the litany of Mary, the mysteries of the rosary, and the messages of Mary in her apparitions, as well as radical women theologians such as Rosemary Ruether and Mary Daly. We then look at the early mediaeval convention of Courtly Love as an effort to combine the positive and negative images of women. In this connection we examine some of the courtly love poetry as well as that most revealing book The Art of Courtly Love by the mediaeval prelate, Capellanus.

In the late mediaeval period we begin to see another trend in the evolution of the Earth Mother concept---the emergence of the housewife. Instead of the woman being joined to the earth as mother she is married to the house as wife. The house is a static piece of material when compared to the nourishing earth. One could say that the philosophical concept

'matter' is more appropriate to house than to earth. The most useful text to trace the beginnings of the change from rural to urban life, of the loss of a direct relation to the land, and of the introduction of the widespread sale of labour power is Marx's Early Manuscripts . When the earth is taken away and money introduced the function of the mother becomes one of consumer. With the rise of the middle class and the ever present problem of women needing to find someone who will support them the links emerge between motherhood, private property, the need to be attractive to men, romantic love, consumerism, and alienation. The Earth Mother recedes into the background except for two caricatures: the fat woman with heavy breasts and the woman who produces several children. The housewife becomes the dominating image of woman. There are several novels which can illustrate this. We have used Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice quite successfully. For negative male reaction to the woman as housewife selections from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kant or Schopenhauer are excellent. And for a positive male critique of philosophical arguments for the inferiority of women use On the Subjection of Women by J.S. Mill.

To integrate this historical material with the present situation of students one need only focus on the present crises in the concept of the housewife. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique is still the best introductory sociological study of this phenomena in North America. She carefully records the struggle for identity which women try to achieve through consumerism, having more children, or through avoidance. One can look at these mistaken alternatives in terms of the historical analysis already given. The first, or consumerism, is a consequence of

the creative need of women being thwarted in society at large and therefore passing into creation of a new house or new self-image by buying. The Earth Mother must give birth to something new. It helps to point out how much the advertisers and capitalists contribute to this pattern of consumerism by playing on women's insecurities. The second way to achieve an identity is to attempt to find it through having many children, through nursing them, through making their clothes by hand, etc. In short it demands a return to the primitive Earth Mother concept. Margaret Mead in Male and Female supported this solution to the housewife's malaise. The fact that it did not work is now widely accepted. The third solution, or avoidance through alcoholism, madness, a tedious life of social rounds, extramarital sex, prostitution, was no solution either. Much is being written in contemporary women's literature about this so there is no end of material that can be used.

We have found it most effective to wait until the end of the course for the detailed study of contemporary alternatives synthesized by the concept of Woman as Political Activist. Here we can go into detail in examining the marxist and feminist arguments. To complete the section of Woman as Earth Mother, however, it is interesting to select two specific examples. The first is that of S Firestone in The Dialectics of Sex. Her thesis is that women will not be liberated until they are completely free of childbearing, and she looks forward to test tube babies. One can see the historical archetype of the Earth Mother here completely rejected in favour of technology and a concept of woman which in no significant way differs from man. Buried with the Earth Mother is also the housewife.

The second example is found in the writings of Selma James, Maria Della Costa, and Giuliana Pompei.¹² These marxist feminists have developed an interesting thesis about the central function of women in revolutionary struggle. Instead of seeing her, as traditional marxists have, as being outside the struggle because of her position as unpaid labourer of pre-marketable goods, James et al. redefine her place as central to the revolution as provider of labour power. They see all women as essentially houseworkers and demand that they be paid for this work by the state. They deride the false dichotomy exposed by the question: "Are you a housewife or do you work?" All women are houseworkers first, and some work outside the house as well.

The bond of houseworker unites all women irrespective of class, and it has the potential for revolutionary redistribution of wealth if pushed to its logical consequence. She provides labour power for the state. Consequently it is the duty of the state to pay for her contribution. In order to do so vast amounts of money must be found. The woman gains new respect because of her central function in society and this respect is recognized by the means our society uses to value its members---by paying a salary. In a most interesting way James' houseworker has achieved the vitality and significance of the Earth Mother in more primitive cultures. In so doing, she has not followed the road suggested by Margaret Mead, the road to imitation of primitive tribal role patterns. She has attempted to integrate the political needs of contemporary society with the active participation of women.

From this example of the study of the Earth Mother using a methodology

of historical analysis it should be clear that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary. It might be possible to study Engels in a Political Science course, the nature of woman's work in an Economics course, the identity crises of housewives in a Psychology course, the history of matriarchy in an Anthropology course, the changing structure of the family in a Sociology course, and Plato's Theory of Forms in a Philosophy course. But there would be no way for the student to integrate these various studies. In the first place in most university courses the situation of women is still neglected, and in the second place most students do not have the training or the time to make these extensive studies and syntheses on their own.

Some examples from some of the other concepts studied in our course will strengthen this claim. In the study of woman as Evil Temptress material is brought together from Classics in the examination of the myth of Pandora, from Religion in the study of Eve, from History in the study of the phenomena of witches, from literature in the study of the femme fatale, from Political Science in the study of the development and legal problems of prostitution. In the study of woman as Virgin Goddess material is brought together from religion in the study of Mariology, from Psychology in the study of male sexual aggression and female sexuality, from Political Science in the study of the difficulties women have in winning a court case of rape, from Sociology in the study of the evolution of double standards and sexual morality. We also study the iconography of the Blessed Virgin in art and poetry ranging from the middle ages to the present. In the study of Woman as Passive Object material is brought

together from Biology in the study of the influence of hormones and genetics on sex-identity, from Education in the study of sex-role stereotyping, from Psychology in the study of psychic factors of sex-identity, and from Sociology in the study of the evolution and character of sex-roles, and in literature by means of a methodology of textual analysis based on our understanding of symbolism.

The material could be organized differently. Throughout the entire course literature and philosophy are used as examples of each particular concept. While novels are possible, we have found shorter pieces such as poems, plays, and short stories to be most effective due to the length of the academic term.

One can well ask at this point how the student can function with such a wide diversity of information. We have learned that they are capable of doing much more than they expected if they are given the right kind of guidance and if the lectures integrate the material adequately. It is important to stress here that the course is only an introductory course, and just as introductory courses in most departments attempt to acquaint the student with the diversity of possibilities awaiting them in the field, so in Women's Studies the student is made aware of the many possibilities which exist within the university.

It is expected that the student will take advanced courses in particular disciplines. At Sir George and in cooperation with Loyola College we are fortunate enough to have several such courses available. In addition we now have what is called a 'Joint Major Component' in Women's Studies which allows the student to combine 5 courses in Women's

Studies with five courses in a particular discipline. It is hoped that this program will develop eventually into a major and MA degree with integrative interdisciplinary courses at the advanced level.

In conclusion then one can see how Women's Studies can benefit from the wide experience and knowledge of presently existing disciplines. In addition, the students who pass through courses in Women's Studies which are interdisciplinary can then bring to their own departments a fresh and innovative approach. It appears then that the marriage between Women's Studies and the university should take place and that it will be of great benefit to both.

FOOTNOTES

1. In Philosophy, for example, in the 20th Century alone we have phenomenology, positivism, pragmatism, existentialism, linguistic analysis, personalism, and Marxist dialectics all claiming priority as methodology.
2. The introductory course at Sir George has been taught for five years by Greta Nemiroff who was trained in English Literature and myself from the department of Philosophy.
3. This might be because they placed women in a totally anomalous position; as non-credit courses stressing woman's rights and importance, their structure reinforced the position that women already have in the society as un-paid laborers (housewives). To study for no credit in a society that discriminates heavily against the "unqualified" does not inspire enthusiasm. (This note is added to the text by Greta Nemiroff. Additions by her will in the future be initialed G.N.).
4. The use of 'she' is merely to designate the majority of students. It in no way excludes male presence in the program.
5. It is this kind of work that I have done in my own field in attempting to come to terms with Aristotle, Plato, Kierkegaard, and Kant and their views on women.
6. One thing which substantiates the claim of its effectuality is the wide range of projects the students choose to do. They are asked to formulate

Footnotes cont'd.

6. one project per term related to the material in the course but also predicated on what each person considers to be the most appropriate focus for her at that time. We have received scholarly papers on the legal rights of women at some particular place and time, on subjects as specific as the "femme fatale" in the art of the "decadent nineties" in Europe or the characterization of women in French Canadian Literature. On the other hand we have been overwhelmed by the beauty of some projects such as fully written and illustrated children's books, related to the course content, journals kept by students and even an incredibly wrought project on the quilt as feminine expression. This latter project included a term-paper on the history of the quilt in Canada, a tape of interviews with women in Montreal who still quilt, and slides of the quilts which they were describing. We terminate the course with a take-home exam which poses questions of a fairly broad nature and are impressed with the general skill with which the students, by the end of the course, are prepared to integrate the material and express it in a focused manner. (G.N.)
7. Here it is also helpful to examine poetry dealing with creation myths such as Hesiod's Theogony as well as art works portraying this fertile figure; the madonna of Willendorf is a prime example. (G.N.)
8. A brief summary of Plato's views are found in "Women and Persons" in Mother was not a Person. ed., Content Publishing Company Ltd., Montreal 1972. I have just completed a more extensive paper on the subject called "Understanding Plato", which has just been accepted for publication by Feminist Studies, Sept. 1974.
9. Aristotle 728 a 17-21. For a study of Aristotle and Kierkegaard on women see "Can a Woman be Good in the Same Way as a Man?" in Dialogue, Vol. X, 1971. no. 3.
10. The entire paragraph was written by Greta Nemiroff.
11. For a detailed study of this conflict between contemporary and historical catholicism and women see "Good and Evil for Women" in Women and Religion, proceedings for the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference.

Footnotes cont'd.

12. Pamphlets by these three women may be obtained from the Canadian Women's Educational Press, 280 Bloor St.W., Station 305, Toronto.